

Historic, Archive Document

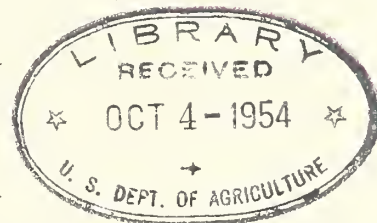
Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

United States Department of Agriculture
Extension Service,
Division of Cooperative Extension

645-F

3
AN APPRAISAL OF EXTENSION WORK IN RURAL SOCIOLOGY

By
Bruce L. Melvin
Rural Research Unit
Works Progress Administration



Introduction

An appraisal of extension programs in rural sociology may be made either of the work itself, or of the work as rural sociology. The second is of more consequence if rural sociologists as a professional class are to perform services of value to rural folk. That one State sponsors recreation and designates it leisure time, while another State promotes a similar program under the title of rural sociology confuses the programs both in sociology and recreation. Similar confusion occurs for the gamut of activities such as discussion, dramatics, schools for ministers, etc., but the difficulty has emerged through efforts to meet folk needs. However, with some analysis such confusion need not continue. This paper, therefore, presents (1) an analysis of the work being done under the title of rural sociology or rural organization, (2) a characterization of rural sociology itself, and (3) the appraisal which is the examination of the relation between the two.

Extension Activities in Rural Sociology

The extension activities in rural sociology, as shown by an examination of the reports of some 15 States, fall into six general classes, which are as follows: (1) Community work, (2) leisure-time activities, (3) group-education, (4) promotional, (5) rural-life studies, and (6) miscellaneous. Under each of these items are various programs which are discussed briefly in the paragraph immediately following.

The community work includes (a) organization, (b) planning, (c) community scoring, (d) working with councils, and (e) stimulating the erection of community buildings. Community organization is more comprehensive than any of the others and in actual project building commonly includes any or all. The extension service in community organization in one State organizes

1.-Presented at Eastern States Extension Conference, Boston, Mass.
February 19 to 21, 1936.

its communities around four major interests: (1) Economics, (2) homemaking, (3) civics and health, and (4) recreation. Under the first, the economic problems of agriculture, including cooperative marketing, are discussed. These discussions are preliminary to actual work in soil improvement, up-building crops, and even reforestation. The homemaking program covers pretty largely home demonstration work such as instruction on keeping an all-year-round garden, canning, controlling pests in the garden, and the handling of poultry. The civic program includes beautifying the school and church grounds, marking unmarked graves, raising home flowers, holding a community fair, and equipping the community house. The work in recreation consists in developing an orchestra, putting on plays, holding home and community parties, formation of a chorus, and teaching new songs to the community. A second State that follows much the same method organizes its communities on the basis of nine committees: Agriculture, homemaking, education, social, health, civic, public welfare, business, and religious life. It is by and through those committees that the particular problems of the community are studied and programs of work evolved. Progress is measured on a progress report card; the operating organization is known as a Standard Community Association. By means of a score card, the community annually measures its own decline or progress. This measuring is done at the annual country-life conference held in the community, at which time also a community council is elected to promote the work for the following year. The consummation of the year's program is the Country Life Jubilee in which most of the northern counties of the State (West Virginia) participate. The community organization as thus fostered becomes a structure through which the extension specialists operate, as well as being an agency to do community work. One sociologist says that "one of our chief functions is to get county agents and State extension specialists to recognize and use a sound sociological approach in all their work. I think we can go so far as to help rebuild the organizational clearance for the whole extension program." (B. L. Hummel)

Community organization in some States consists largely of helping institutions and social agencies to carry on their regular programs more effectively. The sociology specialists, accordingly, contribute to the community and township programs of the farm organizations, performing functions like helping in leadership training, planning demonstrations in recreation, and the supplying of specific helps for program building for community meetings.

Community planning may vary from community organization. Thus rural communities have many local clubs and institutions all of which do group work. Frequently, these agencies have duplicate programs while needed fields of activity are left untouched. Some groups are barely active. Also, local leaders are overworked; conflicts among organizations and misunderstandings among community leaders are common. Community planning helps to harmonize the programs, build needed activities, and iron out conflicts.

Leisure-time activities may constitute a handmaid for other programs or may be furthered as an end within itself. Thus one State includes in its leisure-time program, the giving of assistance in art, music, literature,

874107

and drama; providing leaders to instruct in recreation; organizing choruses; assisting in dramatic productions; helping to hold horseshoe-pitching contests. Recreation has its own reward; volley ball, kitten ball, croquet, tennis, baseball, marbles, swimming, wood chopping, calling contests, spelling, and various forms of music are ends within themselves, to be promoted, although it should not be forgotten that such recreation may be a part of community development.

Group education is closely associated with community work, recreation, and the regular program of the extension service since all these are being furthered by the discussion method. Discussions of current agricultural problems, especially those closely connected with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, have constituted the major segment of the discussion activities for the last few years. Increasing emphasis is being given to conferences for and with rural youth. As yet most of such meetings have been devoted to developing programs by trying to find what young people want. In fact the work for rural youth is just now in its formative - that is the discussion - stage of development.

Discussion as an educational method is becoming an end within itself; it is the social approach to solving individual and group problems. The group may in some cases reach conclusions respecting a program or policy to be followed, while in other circumstances the conclusions are left unstated. Moreover, these who are aiding in group discussions are stimulating participation by farm people and are not making the discussion meetings an opportunity to make a speech. The more the desired results of discussion can be attained, that is, getting the people to do their own work, the less the extension rural sociologist will have to engage in purely promotional work.

Promotional work, however, now consumes much of the rural sociologists' time. They have a heavy responsibility for the rural ministers' school and have played a prominent part in the emergency programs. Rural land planning in one State was part of the responsibility, and rural rehabilitation has assumed considerable importance in some of the States. Under the promotional heading could be listed rural picnics, rural fire prevention, health programs, sending out plays, song sheets, and news letters, and helping in summer camps.

Other activities might be mentioned, but these are sufficient to illustrate that the sociologists' activities are many and varied. The rural sociologists are doing valuable work, in my opinion, or their number would not be increasing. But it is also my belief that their service can be greatly improved by a little careful thinking. I have tried to do that in the two following topics, which discuss the subject matter of rural sociology and the appraisal of the extension program in the light of the material in rural sociology.

The Subject Matter of Rural Sociology

The subject matter of rural sociology as found in textbooks and research publications consists of statistical and descriptive data.

A Study of Rural Society, by Kolb and Brunner,^{2/} one of the latest textbooks in the field of rural sociology, organizes its material concerning rural society around five headings: Organization and structure, its people and their characteristics, agriculture, functions and institutions, trends and policies. These divisions, of course, have their subheads. Taking the data of the textbooks and the research studies together, I would classify the subject matter of rural sociology as follows: Population, the rural community and interest groups, rural institutions, special problems, and rural environment, which varies only slightly from the classification made by Kolb and Brunner. Rural population analyses cover sex and age distribution, marital conditions, migration, attitudes, and rural intelligence and accomplishment as compared with the urban conditions. Sociology studies natural groupings of rural life like the family, the neighborhood, and the community. The studies of rural communities, moreover, have been made from the practical and theoretical approach of analyzing basic rural groups.

Included in the subject matter on communities is rather full information dealing with villages; farm-village relationships, the place of the village in rural organizations, and the function of the village have been analyzed. The structure and functions of villages have been described as a zoologist dissects the body of a frog, examining its structure, and relating the same activities of the frog, that is, the way the frog lives.

Interest groups now characterize rural life more than do the old locality groupings and as such have come in for examination. These interest groups have been classified under 12 types, with each type having more than one function, the one most prominent purpose being social enjoyment.^{2/} Other interests, however, encompass better farming, aid for the school, better business, health, the home, social welfare, and young people.

The primary rural institutions form the framework - the skeleton - of rural society. These are the family, though above referred to as a group, the school, the church, and local government. Data concerning the family have characterized this unit as a group having folkways, mores, and traditions; its structure has been examined, and comparisons of marriage and divorce rates, which are indices of family disorganization, made with urban society. Likewise, much attention has been devoted to the standards of living of farm families in different parts of the country. Likewise, the church and school have received careful examination as societal institutions.

Special problems have held their place in the literature of rural sociology, and in so doing the subject itself has kept its connection with the seedbed from which it has grown. Inadequacy of recreation, lack of rural health facilities, as well as methods of meeting the problems are given considerable space in the textbooks. Moreover, the problem approach is the one frequently used in materials presented on the rural church,

2.-Kolb, J. H., and Brunner, Edmund de S. A Study of Rural Society.
Houghton Mifflin Co., 1935, 642 pp.

rural government, and rural family. Also, interpretations of both the sociology and the problems of rural life have been made in terms of the farm and village environment, which for the last few years has been constantly changing under the impact of modern machinery and urban cultural forces.

But all this is of value in helping us to appraise extension activities in rural sociology.

The Appraisal

The appraisal of work in rural sociology is based on certain criteria. These, as I see them, are: (1) The service extension sociology is now rendering rural people, (2) the function of extension teaching, and (3) the relation of the work in the extension teaching of rural sociology to the subject matter in the field.

The work being done under the guise of extension rural sociology is meeting a real need. Recreation that contributes to personal development, giving both old and young an opportunity for self-expression, is a necessary counter force to the commercialized and passive forms of amusements of the movies and radio. Rural people can produce on their own account. The State college as a service institution is justified in sending out music sheets, old songs, rules for horseshoe pitching, one-, two-, or three-act plays, and suggestions to make the meetings of the farm bureau or a canning demonstration other than merely a business affair.

Also, if county agents and specialists from the State college need assistance in setting up an organization through which or by means of which valuable information on feeding dairy cattle or raising of lima beans can be taken to the farmer, all to the good.

Extension teaching in the State colleges has as its purpose helping rural people solve their problems. If chinch bugs are taking the clover, the extension forces are called. If the baby chicks have pneumonia, the county agent gives information on how to overcome the difficulty. When hard times strike, it is the extension service that helps women make clothing out of flour sacks and raise a garden for a live-at-home program.

Human problems have obtruded themselves into rural society for the past quarter of a century with a sometimes gradual, sometimes rapid, but always disconcerting effect on the leaders and a disorganizing consequence to the institutions. To meet the problems in accordance with the recognized functions of the State colleges, many activities have been instituted and labeled rural sociology. In this connection, a very close friend, a sociologist, wrote me, "Extension rural sociology has grown up opportunistically without scientific direction and guidance. This, of course, is airing sociological linen before the extension directors, and we should not do too much of it, but I think the situation is entirely hopeful at the present time. I think extension people feel the need of more research direction, and at the same time sociologists and experiment-station officials, with a

little urging, would embark rather wholeheartedly on a program which would be of immense value to rural sociology extension work." This quotation brings me to my main point under the discussion on appraising the extension work, that is, the relating of extension rural sociology to the subject material of the field.

Sociology, in one of the extension reports has been well defined as the "science of human relations - in other words the science of group structure and function. This includes the science of social adjustment." This same institution (Wisconsin) logically following this definition, and, as I see it, closely associating its extension program with the subject matter, sets forth as its objectives, (1) to contribute to the development among rural people of the service and art of living and working in groups, (2) to stimulate scientific activities contributing to the development of human values and rural talent, and (3) to assist rural people in developing and coordinating their various groups and institutions in relation to their priority and emphasis in community building." You will note that these purposes when synchronized are to contribute, to stimulate, and to assist rural groups and intergroup efficiency. This, as I see it, does not mean that the rural sociologist as a sociologist would direct drama, lead a chorus, organize a band, or set up a baseball tournament, but he would diagnose the needs of the community or communities and prescribe, to use the medical analogy, or to plan what is needed, to use the social terminology. Too often the rural sociologist has had to assume the role of a specialist in recreation, discussion, and other activities, instead of remaining a sociologist. The person who could perform all these varied activities to which sociology is heir should, it seems to me, be known as a rural-life specialist. But to make the situation concrete, as respects the function of the extension rural sociologist, I shall take an example presented in the New York report.

"Here is a situation in one of the best farming communities in New York State. The village has a population of about 1,500 and the rural territory tributary to the village a population of about 4,000.

"There is a group of approximately 500 young men in and tributary to this village, who have very few constructive group activities. They congregate on the street corners, in the two pool halls, and occasionally at nearby commercial dance halls. The leaders of this community are quite concerned over the activities that are promoted in these commercial recreation places. The existing commercial programs are presented with so much appeal and drawing power that the positive programs in the community are at a decided disadvantage. The adult leaders and leaders among the young people are asking, 'What can we do to improve the situation? Where can we get help?' The young folks and the adults who have money and desire a higher type of recreation go to the nearby city."

There are involved here group organization, community planning, community organization, and a maladjusted situation, the consideration of all of which comes within the province of the rural sociologist. The statement about the youth is, however, one that any observer could make. It is not

a synopsis of the findings of a sociologist.

The sociologist by reason of his knowledge of human society should ask the following questions:

How are these youth unadjusted to their social environment?

Are the institutions and organizations within this village-community adapted to meet the biosocial needs of these youth?

If the agencies of this community-locality cannot meet the needs of its youth how can the interest groups of the area, perhaps including the urban center, be organized to serve youth and to help youth serve itself?

When these questions are answered by the sociologist as a social diagnostician, then it becomes his function to prescribe, to stimulate, and to help the youth and adult leaders to help themselves but not to do the work for them. The sociologist can discover the natural groups among the five hundred youth, who the leaders are, and what special interests and needs the youth possess. Also, he should be able to secure readily by virtue of his possession of critical knowledge what the institutional and organizational resources of the accessible areas are and indicate how these may be used. He helps set up, accordingly, the human, that is, the social structures through which and by means of which the problems of these youths can be met.

The sociologists' job, as indicated by Director Carrigan in his paper at the opening session of this meeting, in respect to these youth lies in (1) discovering what the real problems are, (2) assembling information that bears on the problems, and (3) taking this information to the people of the village-community in such an artful manner that the people themselves will overcome their own difficulties.

To help see rural problems as they are, to bring available knowledge to bear on the maladjusted conditions, and to teach rural people how through group activities to handle their own difficulties, can be performed by a trained rural sociologist. Every State extension service needs one. Also, I would say that it may need twice as many rural-life specialists as rural sociologists, the former being trained in rural sociology as well as their special arts. The sociologist is first a scientist and secondarily, an artist; the rural-life specialist is first an artist and secondarily a sociologist. The force of circumstances, I fear, has made many of our rural sociologists rural-life specialists first and sociologists second. I wish the situation might be reversed.

Conclusion

The extension rural sociologist has a distinct function. He may at some points be pushed into a field that should be designated as that of a rural-life specialist, but such a situation should be temporary only. He is the social architect. He makes his drawings on the basis of facts - facts that can be assembled by the techniques of research. Indeed, research and extension in rural sociology have existed too often as widely separated

activities. At the same time the specialist in rural-life problems has his place. So the extension rural sociologist draws on the facts of the research sociologist, he plans for rural group activities and stimulates rural people themselves to solve rural-life problems in cooperation with rural-life specialists, recreation leaders, teachers of the drama, and others who have special knowledge applicable to rural sociology.
